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The President's Daily Brief

17 February 1969
(Afternoon)

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~~Top Secret~~

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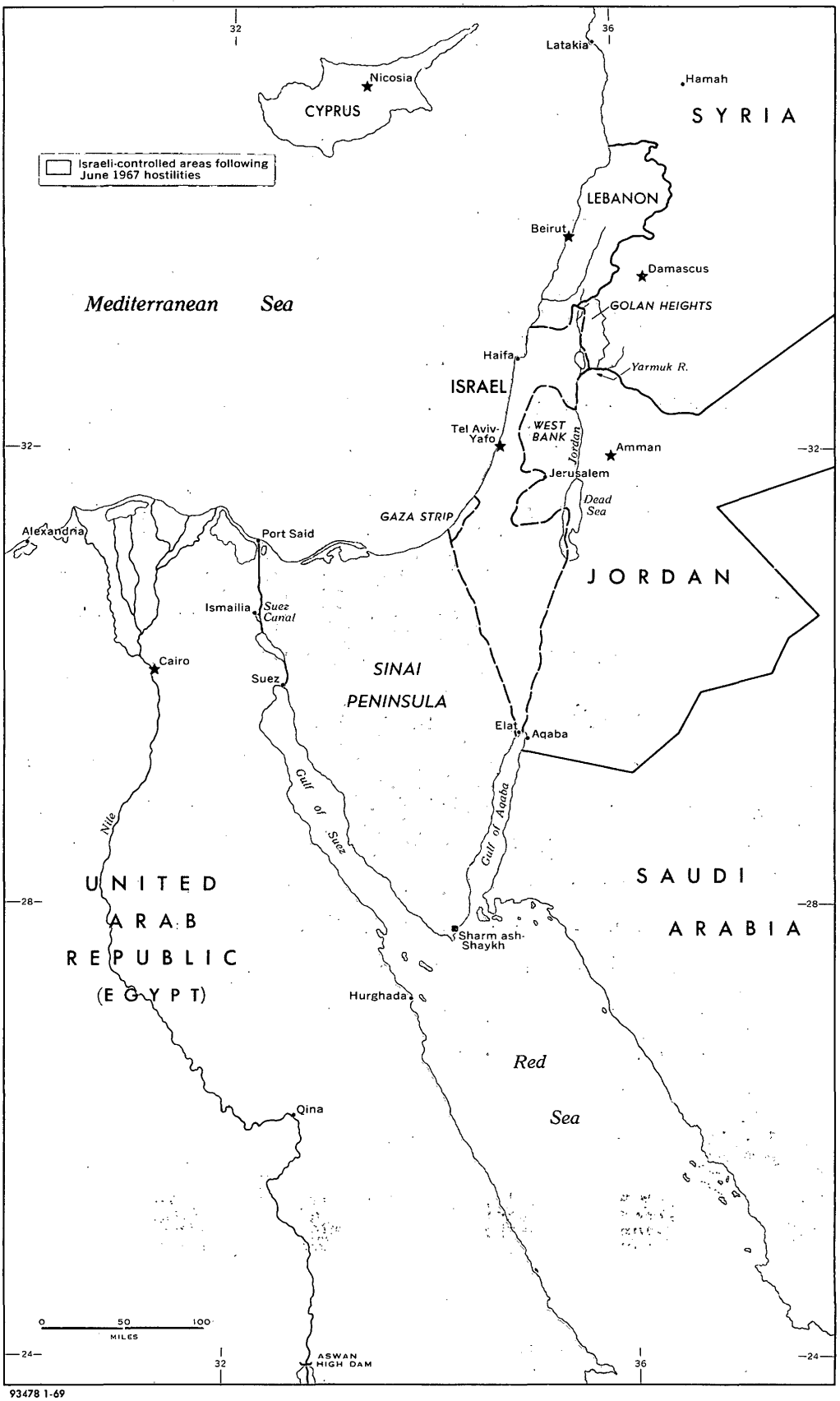

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18 February 1969

LATE NOTES FOR THE PRESIDENT'S DAILY BRIEF OF 17 FEBRUARY 1969

I. MAJOR PROBLEMS

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MIDDLE EAST

[redacted]

EUROPE

The French, in a correction of Monday's press statement, have made it clear that they will not interfere with the meeting of the Assembly of the Western European Union on Thursday and Friday. They are adamant in their refusal to have anything to do with the WEU Council under present circumstances, however. An official at the Elysée told a US Embassy officer that Paris did not want to see the crisis worsen, but he left no doubt that the French thought Britain had to be put back in its place. [redacted]

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SOVIET AFFAIRS

There is nothing of significance to report.

VIETNAM

No significant ground action has been reported since the end of the allies' 24-hour cease-fire. The Communists initiated more than 200 incidents, most of them small scale, during the truce period itself.

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II. OTHER IMPORTANT DEVELOPMENTS

INDONESIA

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COMMUNIST CHINA

The Chinese told the US Embassy in Warsaw this morning that in the wake of the defection of Peking's chargé in the Netherlands, it was "obviously most unsuitable" to go ahead with Thursday's ambassadorial meeting. They said the press would be informed of the meeting's cancellation.

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III. LATE ITEM

EUROPE

UPI reports this morning that the East Germans have closed the main checkpoint for westbound traffic out of West Berlin. We have no amplification.

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I. MAJOR PROBLEMS

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MIDDLE EAST

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EUROPE

There is nothing significant to report.

SOVIET AFFAIRS

The Soviets appear to be preparing for one or two major space events within the next few weeks. One of the events probably will be a circumlunar attempt or a try at a moon landing. Either would be unmanned.

If the Soviets use their largest operational booster--the SL-12--they could soft land several hundred pounds of scientific equipment on the moon's surface. With a payload of that size, a small rocket could return a package of samples to earth or a mobile scientific laboratory could be landed to photograph and analyze the lunar surface.

The other event will probably be a Mars probe. Moscow has missed only one favorable launch opportunity since beginning a Mars program in 1960. Of six previous attempts, none reached the planet in operating condition.

The United States is scheduled to launch a photographic probe toward Mars on 24 February so that the Soviets will have to launch near the beginning of the window which opens about 20 February if they are to reach the planet first.

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VIETNAM

The "serious thoughts" passed to Ambassador Vance on Saturday by Soviet Embassy officer Oberemko strike us as a tentative effort by the Communists to move the new Paris talks into substantive discussions. The origins of Soviet initiatives often are obscure, but in this instance it looks as though Oberemko was conveying a message inspired by the North Vietnamese. He implied as much by noting that he had just talked to Ha Van Lau the day before.

We believe Oberemko's statement that Hanoi is ready for serious talks can be taken pretty much at face value. The North Vietnamese came to Paris in the full expectation of being able eventually to work out a compromise settlement of the war. They probably believe they have little to gain from the current stalemate in Paris. They also appear to be increasingly uneasy over the prospect that the US may decide to sit tight in Paris for a while and to plan for a gradual disengagement of US forces timed to improvements in South Vietnamese capabilities. There is no reason to believe, however, that the Communists are about to cave in on what they regard as essential elements of a settlement.

Oberemko's assertion that "unconditional" Communist demands in the plenary sessions are offered only as openers, and his remark that it is not useful to discuss substantive matters in these sessions, amount to a tentative

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bid by the Communists to resume private talks. The Communists evidently plan to see what develops on the US side as a result of President Nixon's European trip before they move further. If no US effort is made to open private talks after this visit, we suspect the Communists will continue to fish for them via the Soviets and eventually, if necessary, through a direct bid themselves.

Oberemko's version of the three essentials of future Vietnam agreements (withdrawal of "external forces," a political settlement, and guarantees) underscores that the North Vietnamese are prepared to discuss "mutual" troop withdrawals, at least in private; that the Communists insist on a political formula as part of the package; and they they will not oppose some form of control and inspection of whatever agreements are concluded.

* * *

President Thieu plans to give Interior Minister General Khiem such extensive supervisory responsibilities that Khiem seems likely to emerge as a power at least equal to Prime Minister Huong. Thieu has told Ambassador Bunker that as the new deputy prime minister, Khiem will supervise the ministries of Interior, Defense, Revolutionary Development, Information and Open Arms, and Land Reform and Agriculture. This list of Khiem's new responsibilities is more extensive than previously indicated, and includes virtually all the ministries regarded by Thieu as most critical for 1969. Presumably Thieu is looking ahead to political competition with the Communists.

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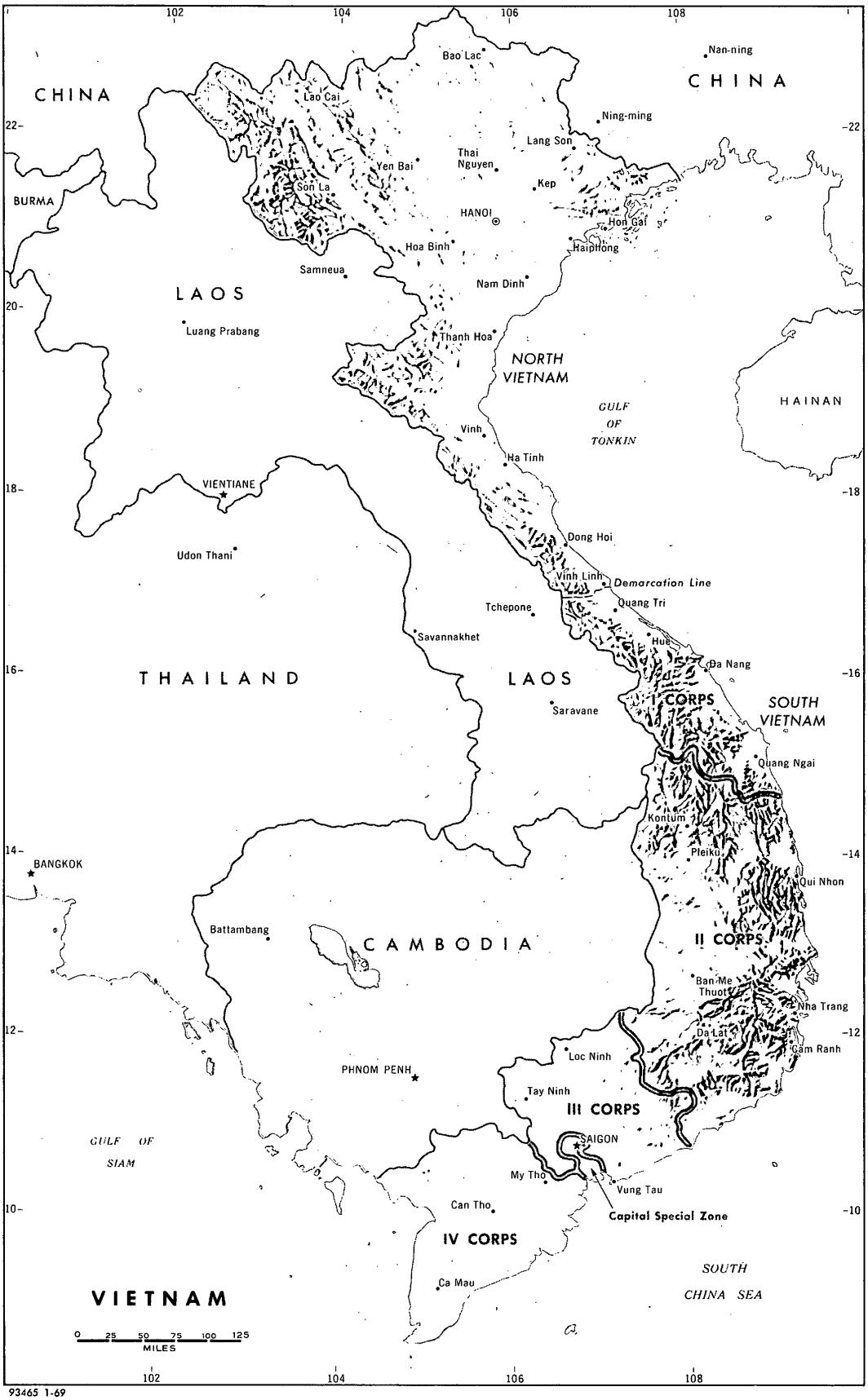

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Thieu believes a major enemy attack will come right after Tet and that the Communists show every sign of being willing to incur heavy losses in order to make a political and psychological effect on the Paris talks and on American public opinion.

Thieu asserted, in a recent conversation with Ambassador Bunker, that the enemy has replaced those battalion and company commanders who in the past employed "hit and run" tactics with men who have shown they will hold their positions even at the cost of heavy losses. Communist commanders who received awards after last year's Tet offensive were not those who had inflicted the heaviest casualties on allied forces, according to Thieu, but those who held their positions longest--for instance, those who holed up in Cholon, even at great cost. Current replacement policy, according to Thieu, suggests that the enemy intends to stay around and in the cities as long as he can to "prove" his strength. Ky seconded Thieu's remarks, saying that "it is the real tigers" who are being given command of enemy units.

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II. OTHER IMPORTANT DEVELOPMENTS

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ANNEX

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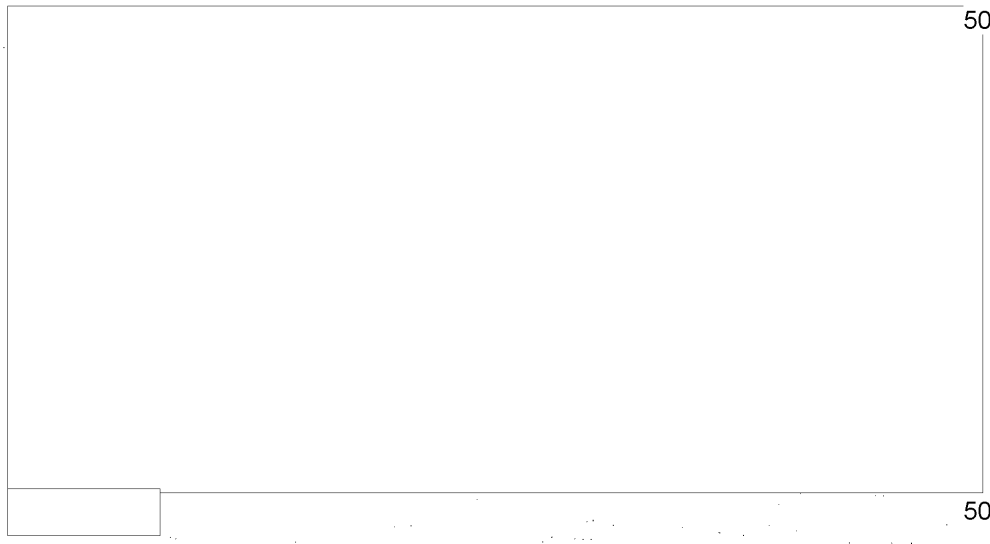

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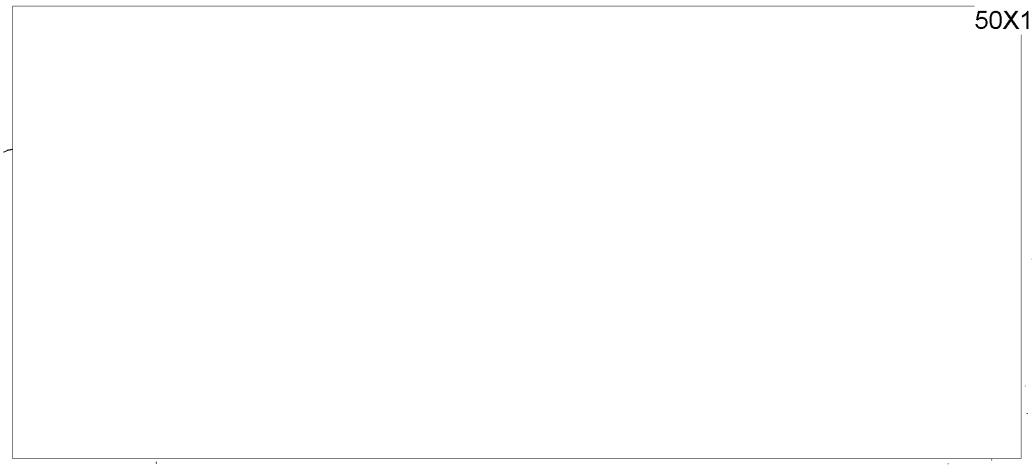

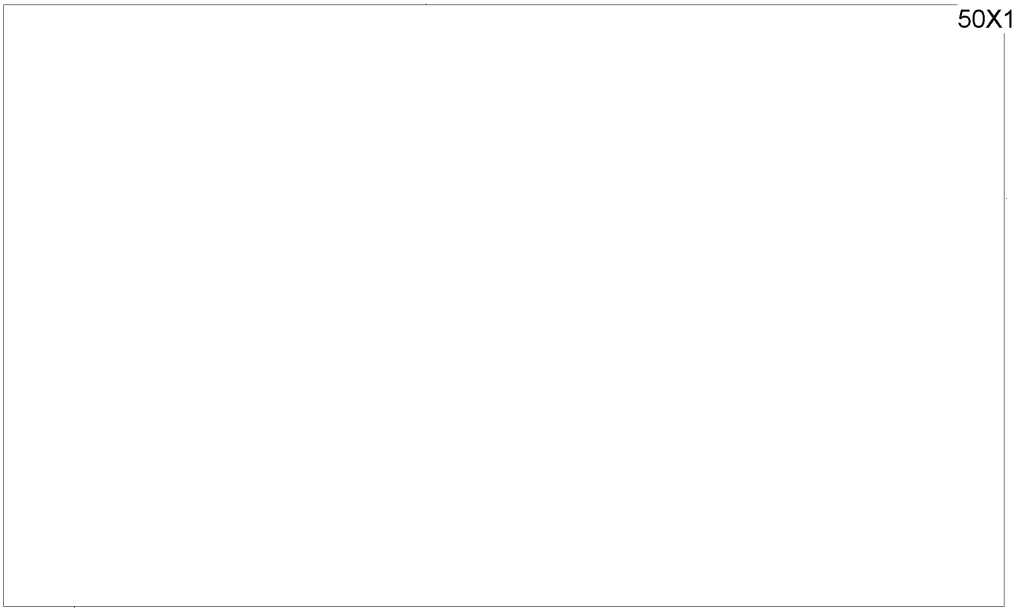

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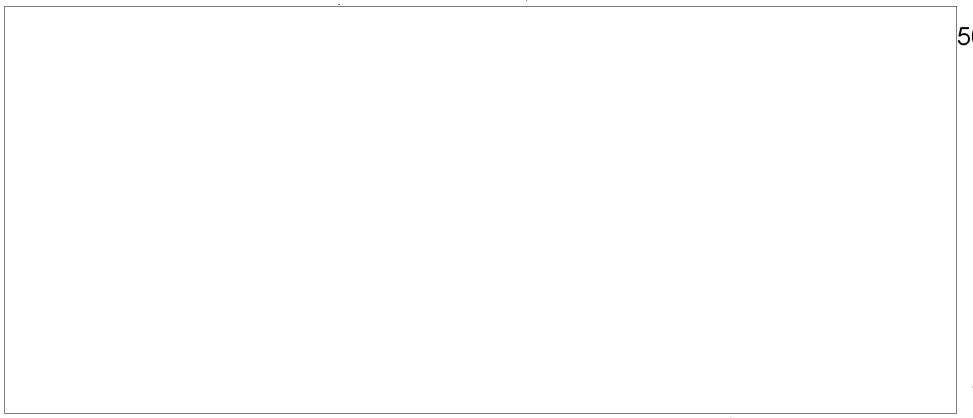

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